

Expert Advice for Using Chinese Herbs

Chinese medicine disagree on the extent to which we need expert advice. Some say always; others say sometimes

Even herbs alone probably won't provide the spectacular success of the Chinese runners. The more they are increased, say the experts, the more effective is Chinese Medicine (TCM) in restoring the martial arts, and the more qi in their bodies. Some say the physical and mental discipline of the runners is more effective than the herbs. Others say that dietary changes, proper rest, and other factors help people to develop and maintain their strength and injury. Nevertheless, many experts agree that Chinese herbs, when used in conjunction with other approaches, can be very helpful. In fact, several approaches, and the differing opinions about how to use them, are discussed below.

The Institute for Traditional Chinese Medicine is very careful when self-prescribing herbs because of the inferior quality of many natural food stores and the lack of proper search. He believes the best way to use herbs is with guidance from a professional.

For the well-informed, Harriet Arndt encourages the average consumer to be cautious with over-the-counter products. She points out that people often choose products they choose based on their own response. "People often choose products themselves," she says; "but the effectiveness is not the sole property of the product." In the case of Chinese medicine, she says, the herb ephedra, or Ma Huang, is often used by the 'pep' segment of the population.

Expert advice should be sought whenever there are serious symptoms or special needs, says Beinfield. One of her patients, for instance, was diagnosed two years ago with multiple sclerosis. After six weeks of taking herbal tonics and undergoing acupuncture, the patient has experienced dramatic increases in energy.

Tonics sold in Asian markets and health food stores are not usually isolated herbs, but rather formulations made up of several herbs. "Chinese herbs," says Natalie Arndt, who teaches Chinese herbology at the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine, "are given in groups in order to nullify the side effect of members of the group, and to achieve a synergistic effect. Put five together, and you'll get ten times the effect." Arndt believes, however, that it can be difficult for people to ascertain which formulations to use. "A kidney tonic may be best for one person," she says, "while others might need their spleens nourished or their liver qi regulated."

Z.F. Linn, a physician who practices TCM, agrees that the use of herbs should be based on individual characteristics. "We don't treat just according to symptoms, because one condition might have several different causes," he says. "People should consult a Traditional Chinese Medicine doctor, rather than try to diagnose their own conditions."

Acupuncturist Patrice Peterson also believes that herbs should be recommended by a trained herbalist. However, she believes that athletes who are in good health can benefit from over-the-counter formulations. "If herbs are taken as a tonic," she says, "some of the patent herbals for sports performance can be helpful."

A careful balance of kidney yin and yang tonics is recommended for athlete customers by Roger Frummer, a Chinese tonic herbalist and manager of the Tea Garden herbal Emporium in Los Angeles. "You have to have yin," Frummer says, "because it's your stored energy. But yang is the spark. You can have all the fuel in the world, but without a spark, you can't use it." -C.S.

Why Herbs Work: The Chinese Explanation

TRADITIONAL Chinese medicine relies on herbology, acupuncture, diet, exercise, and meditation, all of which replenish and fortify the body's resources. Chinese herbs are a particularly potent method of reestablishing and maintaining resistance, flexibility, and endurance. The harmonious condition-which you might call 'health'-is described in terms of yin and yang, life's complementary and polar forces.

In the body, yin refers to blood and essence, and yang refers to vital warmth and qi, best defined as metabolic activity. When these are in their proper proportions, conditions are ideal for the flourishing of mental and physical power. An abundance of qi and blood ensures that a person will be able to ward off and recover from illness and be capable of prolonged and strenuous physical and mental effort. Deficiencies or obstructions of either blood or qi can cause weakness, lack of stamina, and illness.

Each of the Chinese tonic herbs has yin and yang properties, which are thought to influence certain organs and functions in the body. Yin tonics replenish the body's resources, blood and essence; yang tonics build the body's capacity to use its resources and convert them into energy-qi and warmth.

The kidneys, called the "root of life" by the Chinese, determine a person's fundamental level of vitality, and even lifespan. Like all organs, they have both yin and yang characteristics. The yin is stored, potential energy; the yang is active kinetic and metabolic energy that is generated during strenuous activity, such as athletics. Athletes are generally advised to take kidney yang tonics on days they compete, kidney yin tonics in the preparatory phase, and kidney yin and yang tonics during recuperation periods. - C.S.

Sidebar: Chinese Tonic Herbs

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GINSENG *panax ginseng*

Origin: The mountainous regions of China and Korea. Ginseng root acts on the cardiovascular system, regulating blood pressure and sustaining proper cardiac rhythm; it also regulated the central nervous system, promoting relaxation and

What's common between high-performance athletes and the rest of us is that we all consume energy and we all need to replenish it.... The same herbs that enhance athletic performance are also considered anti-aging herbs and immune tonics.

restoring alertness; helps maintain adequate blood glucose; reduces elevated cholesterol; and supports adrenal, thymus, spleen, and thyroid function. Unlike many herbs, ginseng is often traditionally used as a single-ingredient tonic.

Preparation: The following is considered an annual ginseng tonic, taken in the middle of the winter (because the energy of ginseng is very warm), and it can improve energy for the whole year. Steam a whole root to soften it, cut into slices, and place it in a ginseng pot, a tightly covered pot that eliminated evaporation; you can substitute with an ordinary double broiler-either ceramic or glass, since ginseng should not be cooked with metal-with the lid tied or weighed down so that no moisture escapes. Add two cups of water. Cook for six hours; drink a cup of the resulting tea for each of two successive days. Start out with White Chinese ginseng or American ginseng, rather than Red Korean or Red Chinese ginseng until you learn more how the herbs affect you. Red ginseng is processed in a way that enhances its yang-heating and stimulating-properties. It can cause discomforts in some people, includ-

ing hot flashes, headaches, dehydration, rapid heart rate, palpitations, and elevated blood pressure ("ginseng abuse" occurs mostly among people in Asia who overuse Red ginseng).

CORDYCEPS *sinensis*

Origin: The mountainous regions of China and Tibet. A sexual and respiratory tonic that enhances immunity, invigorates repro-

A carefully prepared annual ginseng tonic taken mid-winter (one cup of the tea on each of two successive days) is believed to improve energy for the whole year. Start with White Chinese or American ginseng.

ductive capacity, and relaxes spasms of the heart, bronchi, and intestines. Like ginseng, it is both tranquilizing and strengthening.

Preparation: Cordyceps is one of the safest and gentlest tonics, and a good one with which to begin. In China, it is given to people no matter what their age, gender, or state of health. It is often cooked in soups or stews or prepared with such meats as duck or chicken. For weakness, use once a day. For health maintenance, use once a week.

ASTRAGALUS *membranaceus*

Origin: Northern China and Mongolia. Preparations of this root increase muscle mass, strength, and endurance; protect the liver against toxicity and enhance its ability to store and release glucose; improve the diuretic function of the kidney; and reduce blood pressure by increasing the elasticity of blood vessels.

Preparation : The root comes sliced in long, flat pieces that look like tongue depressors. It is good to cook with meat, vegetable, or mushroom soup stock. Cook an ounce of astragalus in a couple of quarts of liquid. This makes a potent liquid food that you